

# **Journal of European Baptist Studies**

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## 2017 Hughey Lectures

Wednesday 18 January 2017

### Dr Ian M. Randall

Ian M. Randall is a Senior Research Fellow of IBTSC Amsterdam and Research Associate of the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide. He is the author of numerous books, including *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century* (2005), *Rhythms of Revival: The Spiritual Awakening of 1857-1863* (2010), and a study of the Bruderhof Community's spirituality – *Church Community is a Gift of the Holy Spirit* (2014).

He will deliver two lectures on the theme of 'Baptist and Anabaptist Peace Witness: From the First to the Second World Wars'.

#### Lecture 1

English Baptists and  
the Peace Movement

#### Lecture 2

An Anabaptist  
Witness: the  
Bruderhof Community



The event will take place in the Chapel of Tyndale Theological Seminary, Egelantierstraat 1, 1171 Badhoevedorp, Amsterdam.

**For further information contact David McMillan** [mcmillan@ibts.eu](mailto:mcmillan@ibts.eu)

While there is no charge for the lectures, those attending will be required to meet their own travel, accommodation, and subsistence costs in Amsterdam.

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## Editorial

In this edition of JEBS we are pleased to welcome three new contributors. Each of them in their own way offers an example of contextual theological reflection.

Alistair J. McKitterick introduces what he describes as the Theological Imperative (TI) model of theological reflection which he has taught in practical theology classes. The emphasis in this approach is ‘on theologically-laden practical responses to complex pastoral encounters with others’. That is, McKitterick is concerned to articulate a form of theological reflection which goes beyond the merely complex descriptive but explicitly engages with theological resources in order to guide future practice. In various ways this article touches upon the interesting notion of the status of different forms of knowledge and the relationship between them.

Gillian Carlisle provides a very explicit example of theological reflection. This demonstrates a model of theological reflection applied. The significance of her contribution, however, is also found in the subject matter. She reflects upon the reaction of her son Zac, who has been diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, to a ‘glass wall’ which separated a chapel from the rest of Buckfast Abbey in Devon, England. This invites consideration not simply of the incident, of children and spirituality, but of the spiritual experiences and insights of those with autism. Deeply personal, this reflection is an introduction not simply to method but to a subject worthy of wider consideration within the Christian church.

In the third article Wojciech Kowalewski takes us in a different direction. Developing a paper originally presented at the IBTSC Conference on ‘Conflicting Convictions’ in 2015, he discusses ‘Conflicting Views of Freedom and the Impact on Mission in a Post-Communist Context’. This article gives an insight into the impact of ‘freedom’ in Poland. In this article he discusses various views of freedom, various Christian responses and concludes with articulating what he considers to be a positive example of creating space for such freedom in a missiological perspective, not least in relation to the SLOT Art Festival.

**Revd Dr Stuart Blythe (Rector IBTSC Amsterdam)**

# The Theological Imperative Model for Practical Theology

Alistair J. McKitterick

## Introduction

George Pattison claimed that the problem with theology is that it is a discipline without a methodology.<sup>1</sup> Theologians, he argued, have borrowed from the practices of the other humanities. This is no longer true (if it ever was) in the case of practical theology. There is now an abundance of models of theological reflection, including those of Laurie Green, Stephen Pattison, Don Browning, Swinton and Mowat, Richard Osmer, Andrew Todd, Judith Thompson, Helen Cameron et al., Killen and de Beer, Thomas Groome, and various others.<sup>2</sup> This article introduces the Theological Imperative (TI) model of theological reflection that I have taught as part of a practical theology module. It focuses on theologically-laden practical responses to complex pastoral encounters with others.

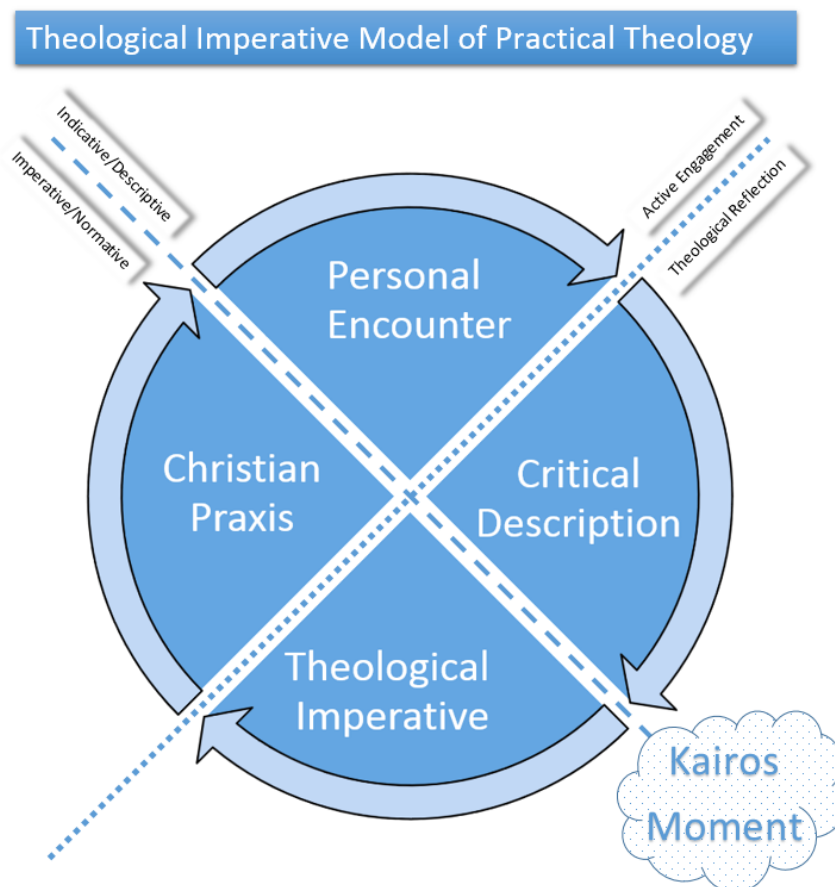
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<sup>1</sup> George Pattison, *The End of Theology — and the Task of Thinking About God* (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Those not referred to later in this article are: Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology* (London: Mowbray, 2009); Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry — the Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1991); and Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

## Two Modes of Thinking in the TI Model

At the heart of the TI model is a dividing line, or an axis of thought, between Critical Description and Theological Imperative. This line marks two different moods of expression, namely the indicative and imperative moods. The relevance of this distinction becomes clear when engaging with the relevant social sciences in order to discern what we ‘ought’ to do. We reflect upon descriptive disciplines in order to arrive at a normative response. The TI model draws attention to this important transition of thought. It is especially important when we dialogue with the social science disciplines



because science is inherently a descriptive enterprise. One of the first to articulate science’s limitations in contributing to a moral ‘ought’ was Max Weber. He was remarkably frank about science’s inability in providing help for human flourishing. Weber argued that we must reject any naive optimism that science itself can tell us how we ought to live.

Under these internal presuppositions, what is the meaning of science as a vocation, now that all these former illusions, the ‘way to true being’, the ‘way to true art’, the ‘way to true nature’, the ‘way to true God’, the ‘way to true happiness’, have been dispelled? Tolstoy has given the simplest answer, with the words: Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall

we live?’ That science does not give an answer to this is indisputable. The only question that remains is the sense in which science gives ‘no’ answer, and whether or not science might yet be of some use to the one who puts the question correctly.<sup>3</sup>

Since science is of necessity a descriptive discipline, it should be expressed in the indicative mood. Using science to derive moral obligations is either an abuse of the nature of science or an instance of ‘smuggling in’ theological presuppositions (consciously or unconsciously). In a book entitled *Why Psychology Needs Theology*, Murphy outlines the implications of Weber’s conception of the scientific enterprise. Science has properly sought to identify only causal explanations to problems based on empirical evidence. In their attempt to locate their activities in the realm of description and explanation, social scientists have tended to deny the possibility of a moral critique of life to avoid introducing a teleological aspect to science. Science commonly understood (and the social sciences in particular) is not concerned with goal-oriented questions regarding what we are here for, or how we ought to live (concepts which are properly understood to be theological). Murphy spells out the theological implications:

My question for the psychologists is this: If the secular academy has indeed turned away from any theological account of the *telos* of human life, is it not *necessarily* the case that secular psychologists will have confused ideas about what they are supposed to be doing?<sup>4</sup>

It is this self-imposed lack of teleology that makes a dialogue between science and theology necessary, Murphy argues. Theology challenges the secular-scientific view of what well-being, or self-fulfilment, or moral obligation might mean by bringing a biblical worldview to bear on these topics. Theology brings a normative critique to the principles of the secular psychologist on the basis of, for example, the biblical narrative of the creation of human beings, or the Lordship of Christ. Browning writes:

[M]oral psychology itself cannot provide an account of why these principles are moral principles. Nor can it provide and justify the grounds or beliefs about the status of humans that these principles assume. Only some form of religious faith—such as the Jewish and Christian belief in the status of all humans as children of God—can adequately provide and justify these grounds.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, ‘Science as Vocation’, originally published as “Wissenschaft als Beruf”, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1922), pp. 524–55. From *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. & trans. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 129–156.

<sup>4</sup> Nancey Murphy, ‘Constructing a Radical-Reformation Research Program in Psychology: A Radical-Reformation Perspective’, in *Why Psychology Needs Theology*, ed. by Alvin Dueck and Cameron Lee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 53–76 (p. 56).

<sup>5</sup> Don Browning, *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 55–56.

Although the social sciences are often perceived as presenting evidence that leads to a moral position of how we ought to live our lives or conduct society, there is always a philosophical and theological gap in their argument; ‘science alone cannot establish the broader theory of experience and praxis required to give the more discrete facts of science their full meaning’.<sup>6</sup> Browning agrees with Weber that the moral psychologies have overstepped their limits. They have imported a set of values or moral vision without sufficient philosophical foundation. They have succumbed to what David Hume called the habit of turning an ‘is’ into an ‘ought’.<sup>7</sup> Theology, far from being an optional dialogue partner, is the essential voice in any discussion of moral significance.

## Outline of the Theological Imperative Model

The Theological Imperative (TI) Model identifies and represents these different phases of thought and action through the use of axes. There are two axes to note, the *mood* and the *mode* axes. We discussed the mood axis above, namely the axis between description and normative theology, or between the indicative and the imperative. The second axis represents the boundary between different modes of activity, between active and reflective modes.

### Personal Encounter

The TI model is concerned with our practical response to a pastoral problem, and so the process starts with a person (at least one) at its heart. This will be someone with whom we are in contact, and someone with whom we share a context. We do not so much stumble across situations, or have an experience, but rather we encounter people and engage with their stories and face their tensions with them.

Other models of theological reflection variously describe the starting point as the ‘situation’ or ‘current praxis’. Swinton and Mowat are inconsistent in their labels at this point, probably resulting from an ambiguity about whether the theological reflection is more a form of self-reflective action research or a practical response to a pastoral crisis.<sup>8</sup> In the context of the module, teaching theological reflection as a response to a pastoral

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<sup>6</sup> Browning, *Christian Ethics*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739, book III, part I, section I, cited in ‘Is–ought problem’, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is%E2%80%93ought\\_problem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is%E2%80%93ought_problem)> [accessed 4 April 2016]

<sup>8</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 94–95.



encounter is intuitive for students and usually receives a very engaged response. Consequently, the TI model starts from a pastoral perspective in response to the needs of others with whom they have a relationship, hence the ‘Personal Encounter’ label (PE). The starting point, then, in common with other models of practical theology, is active relational experience rather than theory.

Instead of seeking to respond to a problem uncritically, the practical theologian develops the reflex of theological reflection and overcomes the tendency to act out of habit (or tradition, or what is considered ‘best practice’). The PE phase represents the moment of need when we do not know what to do, or we are sufficiently self-aware to be suspicious of responding ‘as usual’. The PE evokes a desire to respond. It might take the form of what Daniel Stern calls the ‘moment of meeting’, and is described as ‘a transforming relational encounter where false selves are pulled back and people experience a more authentic relational intersubjectivity or shared states of mind’.<sup>9</sup> It is not about dispassionate observers but rather those who are actively engaged with the people in the situation. It is important, therefore, to establish who ‘I am’ in the process of reflection. Who am I in relation to the person encountered (for example, friend, neighbour, pastor, youth worker, colleague)? Since we are seeking to respond to a situation focused on someone else, our reflection will be in the first and second person. This model of theological reflection begins by responding to ‘you’, a person with whom ‘I’ have a relationship through this encounter. That is, ‘I’ will be concerned with ‘you’. This is usually ‘translated’ into a third person discussion (what ‘one’ ought to do for ‘him’ or ‘her’) when it comes to presenting the reflection to others, but this should not detract from the interpersonal emphasis at the heart of the theological reflection. It is ‘my’ reflection seeking to engage and interact with the situation ‘you find yourself in’.

### Critical Description

The transition from the PE phase to the Critical Description (CD) phase is marked by a desire to step back, to see things afresh, and to develop our understanding of what is really ‘going on’. It marks the transition from an active mode into a reflective mode. The decision to reflect on the complex issues raised by the PE takes courage, partly because it involves a turn to disciplines with which the practical theologian is not fully conversant, and

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<sup>9</sup> F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 225; citing D. N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: WW Norton, 2004).

partly because there is a strong temptation to remain in an active mode and react immediately and unreflectively in response to someone's real need. The turn to critical reflection is therefore an act of faith, believing that engagement with both theology and the social sciences will result in better, more faithful praxis than acting immediately.

The aim of the CD phase is to produce a multi-layered (that is, a multi-discipline) description in the indicative mood of the issues raised in the PE. This requires turning to the best quality sources available in each particular discipline by turn. By taking an interdisciplinary approach the practical theologian will begin to see the situation afresh, to critique presuppositions, and have a broader understanding of what is really going on. In teaching this approach to undergraduate students the two social sciences found to be most accessible and applicable are psychology and sociology. In order to understand any PE deeply, it is useful to gain insights into both internal motivations and external causes for behaviours and needs. Browning argues that Christians should engage with the social sciences 'diagnostically'.<sup>10</sup> It is because personal encounters are complex that our Christian traditions and theology should be supplemented with insights from whatever other disciplines are considered useful in order to produce a more comprehensive 'thick' description.

The Theological Imperative model includes a theological 'voice' alongside the descriptions from the social sciences. Browning uses the term 'descriptive theology' in his outline of practical theology to mean theology as a descriptive discipline before it is used to achieve a particular normative end.<sup>11</sup> The social science and theological disciplines should each present their best descriptions of the issues pertaining to the PE in the indicative mood so that their contributions can be compared and contrasted. As far as possible, these descriptions should be put positively in terms of what *is* the case, rather than negative descriptions of what *is not* the case, in order to avoid inadvertently expressing a moral perspective. For instance, saying that someone is not independent implies that the person ought to be independent, which is to import an imperative too soon into the reflective process. The positive (indicative) description would in this case be that the person was dependent in some way, a description that does not presuppose that dependency is problematic. This descriptive task befits the nature of the scientific enterprise, and it enables the dialogue between the disciplines to progress (at this stage) as a conversation between equals, resulting in a thick description.

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<sup>10</sup> Browning, *Christian Ethics*, p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 72.

This use of descriptive theology raises the question of what counts as a theological theory analogous to, say, a sociological theory. Bryman discusses the nature of ‘theory’ in the social sciences, and concludes that “‘theory’ may be little more than the literature on a certain topic in the form of the accumulated knowledge gleaned from books and articles”.<sup>12</sup> What counts as good theological CD is a way of framing the PE using theological terms and concepts. By considering the encounter through a theological lens we perceive the situation in light of our Christian tradition and Scriptural understanding.

Cameron et al. have developed an approach to theological description known as the ‘four voices’ approach. The methodology, described in *Talking About God*, functions as an heuristic that enables theological reflection from several perspectives, namely the *operant*, *normative*, *espoused*, and *formal* theologies.<sup>13</sup> Cameron argues that it is important to ‘[recognise] the four voices as a working tool, rather than any kind of complete description of theology’.<sup>14</sup> These different theological expressions enable us to articulate theologically what is going on (operant and espoused) and to what extent it is in accordance with theological expectations (normative and formal). These expressions or ‘voices’ (particularly operant, espoused, and formal) are useful in enabling the practical theologian to incorporate a theological description to the CD.<sup>15</sup> ‘What becomes essential in this task is a practical and attitudinal commitment to a complex theology disclosed through a conversational method.’<sup>16</sup>

### **Correlation: The Method of Critical Description**

There have been many different approaches to interdisciplinary engagement but the common theme is some form of correlation. Alastair Campbell articulates a rather Barthian form of correlation that looks only to the Christian tradition. Practical theology for him involves ‘selecting contemporary situations from the life of the church and the world and setting them alongside the current theories and research conclusions of biblical

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Helen Cameron and others, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), pp. 53–56.

<sup>14</sup> Cameron and others, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> A distinction is needed between what participants in the situation say ought to be going on (normative theology) and what the practical theologian concludes ought to be the theological imperative. The first is a description of the norms of those involved; the second is the motivating theology that shapes future praxis.

<sup>16</sup> Cameron and others, p. 56.

scholars, church historians and systematic theologians'.<sup>17</sup> Swinton and Mowat propose the metaphor of showing hospitality to other disciplines, aiming for a 'conversion' of the qualitative research arising from the social sciences.<sup>18</sup>

Many point to Paul Tillich as the founder of the correlational approach. Tillich articulated the existential problems of anthropology in theological terms and then addressed them again through theological symbols and language in a kind of 'mutual interdependence'.<sup>19</sup> He argued that 'theology is a correlation of existential questions that emerge from cultural experience and answers from the Christian message'.<sup>20</sup> It is correlational in the sense that correlations occur 'between what has taken place in reality with a new reality that has taken place in the mind'.<sup>21</sup> Allen claims that Tillich's approach is no more than a form of 'self-understanding', but admires his rigorous application of methodology.<sup>22</sup> David Tracy has championed the critical correlation approach in practical theology. He also considered Tillich's approach to be less correlational and more a matter of juxtaposing the kerygma and the social context. Tracy insists on bringing the two into real, critical conversation.<sup>23</sup> Sanks gives a useful summary of Tracy's approach:

There are two sources for theology, common human experience and language and the Christian tradition as found primarily in texts; the first source is to be investigated by a hermeneutical phenomenology of the religious dimension in common human experience and language, and the second source is to be investigated by historical and hermeneutical methods. The results of these investigations are to be correlated to determine their significant similarities and differences, and their truth value will be determined by an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical reflection.<sup>24</sup>

Tracy believes that when any phenomenological approach brings insights that have adequate 'disclosive power', then they have meaning for

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<sup>17</sup> Alastair Campbell, 'The Nature of Practical Theology', in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. by Stephen Pattison and J. Woodward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 77–88 (p. 85).

<sup>18</sup> Swinton and Mowat, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1, p. 60. Cited in Michael Gleghorn, 'Paul Tillich's Theological Method: A Summary Evaluation', <<http://michaelgleghorn.com/documents/PaulTillichsTheology.pdf>> [accessed 20 April 2016]

<sup>20</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Paul L. Allen, *Theological Method, A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> Allen, p. 187.

<sup>23</sup> See Okey's comments on Tracy's use of Tillich in Stephen Okey, 'The Plural and Ambiguous Self: The Theological Anthropology of David Tracy' (Diss: Boston College Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2013), p. 46, <<http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:104392>> [accessed 20 April 2016]

<sup>24</sup> T. Howland Sanks, 'David Tracy's Theological Project: An Overview and Some Implications', *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), 698–727 (p. 705); Sanks cites David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975), p. 53 as his source for the outline of Tracy's argument.

understanding our experience. This experience needs to be reflected on from a transcendental or metaphysical perspective (what Tracy calls ‘fundamental theology’) to consider the extent to which the description has internal coherence. The practical theologian turns to ‘historic Christianity’ (and in particular the Scripture) to bring a sense of understanding of the situation, to see if it is ‘true to life’.<sup>25</sup>

Browning’s revised model of correlation develops Tracy’s approach between the various secular disciplines and historic Christianity. For Browning, ‘[p]ractical theology is the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian faith with the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation’.<sup>26</sup> As Dakin puts it, Browning’s method ‘allows him to correlate ordinary experience with religious praxis in order to develop a conversation in which there is a mutual understanding within a single perspective in relation to a wider religious horizon’.<sup>27</sup>

A simpler form of this correlational approach is Stephen Pattison’s ‘critical conversation’ model.<sup>28</sup> His approach is to allow the student to express their feelings and instinctive responses in conversation with the Christian tradition and the contemporary situation. This three-way, critical conversation represents a simple model for hearing and engaging the different voices pertinent to the experience under reflection.

The TI approach draws insights from these methods. In common with others, it advocates attending to a range of social science disciplines as well as a theological description in order to construct a multi-layered description of the experience. This is a complex task for those in pastoral roles on their own, requiring significant time and effort. In a group setting, it often works well for each member to research the issues of the PE from the perspective of a different discipline and report back to the others. This allows each of the disciplines (including theology) to be heard and to be challenged by the other perspectives. This critical conversation should be kept in the indicative (and interrogative) mood at this stage, with a view to generating a creative insight that will inform a response. It is this creative insight, this energising moment, that moves the theological reflection from description to norm, from the indicative mood to the imperative.

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<sup>25</sup> Tracy, *Blessed*, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 47; citing David Tracy, ‘Foundations of Practical Theology’ in *Practical Theology*, ed. Don Browning (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 61–82 (p. 76).

<sup>27</sup> Tim Dakin, ‘The Nature of Practical Theology: Repeating Transformation — Browning and Barth on Practical Theology’, *Anvil* 13 (1996), 203–21 (p. 210).

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Pattison, ‘Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection’, in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. by Stephen Pattison and J. Woodward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 135–45.

## The Kairos Moment

The goal of the TI model for this form of practical theology is to generate theologically-informed action through the deeper insight and changed perspective coming out of the process of critical correlation. At some point, then, the CD phase gives way from describing the situation to proposing specific goals. The mood will change from the indicative to the imperative ('we should', or 'we ought'). The trigger for such a change is some kind of insight that holds many of the earlier descriptive insights together and marshals them into a basis for action. This moment of clarity, this change of mood, is often called the *Kairos* moment, and in this model it marks the crossing of the mood axis from the Critical Description phase to the Theological Imperative phase. It initiates the momentum, and sets the direction, for Christian Praxis. In light of its significance, it should be a matter of prayer that the *Kairos* moment will be a revelatory moment of discernment guided by the Holy Spirit.

The notion of the *Kairos* moment stems from a number of sources. In Oscar Cullman's notable work, the New Testament Greek term *kairos* is explained as 'a point in time that has a special place in the execution of God's plan of salvation'.<sup>29</sup> It is in these moments in time that redemptive history (God's direct intervention in the world) is related to general history.<sup>30</sup> The term also has resonances with the theologians behind the 1985 South African *Kairos Document*, written in the context of Apartheid, and so has connotations of prophetic speech seeking liberation from oppression. Its use in practical theology is commonplace: Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, for example, sees God as the 'agent of *kairos*', and understands *kairos* to mean 'the place where the Spirit of God is mediating and intervening in life and we participate in this action'.<sup>31</sup> The particular role that it plays in the TI model of reflection is similar to its inclusion in Judith Thompson's diagram, credited to Andrew Todd.<sup>32</sup>

Expecting theological reflection to involve a *Kairos* moment is based on the assumption that the Bible, theology, the Christian tradition and the Holy Spirit are all seeking change; '[t]o live in faith is also to be open to an

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<sup>29</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (London: SCM Press, 1951), p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> For a critique of James Barr's objections to Cullman's use of the terminology, see Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 20–25.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, 'Participatory Action Research', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 234–43 (pp. 239–40).

<sup>32</sup> Todd's own use of it is unpublished; see Judith Thompson, *SCM Study Guide to Theological Reflection*, in collaboration with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson (London: SCM Press, 2008), p. 56, and Chapter 5 more generally for extended discussion on the *Kairos* moment.

open future'.<sup>33</sup> The conviction that we are called to be part of God's ongoing programme of restoration and renewal and redemption of the world leads us to expect a *Kairos* moment. The *Kairos* moment is that revelatory moment where a new idea and fresh hope is brought to the PE, that initiates a solution to the theological problem. It is rather like the twist in a novel; the idea may have been there latently but gone unnoticed until it initiates the denouement. From the *Kairos* moment onwards, there is hope for change and renewal. That new idea, framed in the language of moral obligation and theological concepts, is the theological imperative.

### Theological Imperative

The Theological Imperative (TI) phase of the reflective cycle harnesses the hope and energy of the *Kairos* moment and expresses it as a theological concept that empowers and specifies the Christian Praxis (CP). It is the fruit of the critical correlation between the disciplines and becomes the 'big idea' that informs and directs the activities that flow from it. It is a turn to Christian concepts under the explicit theological presupposition that within the Christian tradition (and most especially Scripture) there are more than enough symbolic resources to inspire and guide our actions. It is this theologically-laden concept that turns Christian activism into Christian praxis. Tracy describes this turn to Christian symbolism to direct praxis in this way:

That all critical theories need the complement of symbolic representations has been argued in the preceding section. But the hope of a revisionist theology is that the return to symbol and, through symbolic meaning, to praxis be achieved through, not around, the most critical reflection upon those symbols. At that point, a post-critical or second naiveté towards the Christian symbols present in Western culture might be a real possibility for the Christian and non-Christian alike.

That critical reformulation should, in principle, eventually allow Christian theologians of praxis to find words that may render that call to liberation so clear that, as Albert Camus remarked, 'even the simplest man can understand its meaning'. Such stark primal language was once employed in the parabolic limit-language of the New Testament. That language could again be employed with integrity if and when the long journey through hard empirical evidence and critical thought — parallel to the Christian and Marxist long journey through the institutions — clarifies its own fundamental self-understanding.<sup>34</sup>

In the terminology used in this model, the TI moves the practical theologian from describing the situation into setting the vision for subsequent action, and this vision is an out-working of Christian theology. The Critical

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Ballard, 'Theological Reflection and Providence', *Practical Theology* 1 (2008), 285–89 (p. 288).

<sup>34</sup> Tracy, *Blessed*, pp. 247–48.

Description is a theory-laden articulation of the Personal Encounter, and the Theological Imperative is the theory motivating our Christian Praxis (which by definition is theory-laden practice). This dynamic is similar to Browning's approach:

The view I propose goes from practice to theory and back to practice. Or more accurately, it goes from practice to theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices.<sup>35</sup>

The CD provides the intellectual energy for the *Kairos* moment where a biblical or theological concept can 'bubble up to the surface' of the critical conversation and become the TI. It is what Schleiermacher called the moment of divinatory understanding, or what Bennett terms 'intuitive perception'.<sup>36</sup> There will be something satisfying about such a concept in the way that it holds so many of the previous insights together and can inspire others to action in response to the PE.

Although the *Kairos* moment, the source of the TI, has been talked about in rather revelatory terms, the TI itself is not beyond criticism. Whatever theological insight is brought about through such a process of critical reflection is itself subject to critical reflection. As with an author working on a narrative plot-line, there is no one necessary solution to the tensions surrounding the characters in the story, and a number of endings could be imagined. So it is with the TIs that arise from theological reflection. There could be any number of possible theological concepts that arise, and this introduces the need for some level of critical comparison between them. Consequently, a set of criteria is needed to judge the various TIs proposed. A good Theological Imperative has a number of characteristics.

A good TI should be *brief* so that it can be easily communicated to others. The theological concept of the 'Good Samaritan' is easier to express and share than, say, 'God's relationship to his people Israel in Deuteronomy'.

A good TI should be *narrow* enough in scope so that it seems to 'fit' the PE specifically and therefore provides limits on the range of possible actions. 'Love' or 'mission' are much too broad concepts, because there is very little subsequent action that could not flow from them, and no PE that could be excluded from them, which rather defeats the value of the Critical Descriptive phase. A narrow TI is more context-specific.

A good TI should *integrate* key insights from the CD phase in a discernible way. It is this sense of integration of those various theories and

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<sup>35</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Zoë Bennett, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 36.



observations that counters objections that the *Kairos* moment and TI are merely arbitrary choices. Although the generation of any TI will be strongly influenced by the personal background and traditions of the practical theologian, the TI itself will be more or less robust and defensible, to the extent that it integrates the various insights brought out during the CD phase. This means that the TI is up for critique, and this sense of integration is one of the key criteria against which it should be judged.

A good TI should (at least from the perspective of my own teaching context) be strongly *Christian* in content. The working assumption is that the Christian tradition is immensely rich in redeeming concepts and paradigms of practice, and that theological reflection should aim to employ these concepts as TIs in the service of God's Kingdom. Whereas it might be convenient to turn to, say, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as an imperative concept in light of some pressing situation, the Christian practitioner may well be better served by turning to such theological imperatives stemming from James 2.14-17, or Matthew 25.35-36.

A good TI should be *teleological*. Teleology transforms practical theology from being a form of activism to being what Browning calls 'strategic practical theology'.<sup>37</sup> A teleological TI transforms the question 'what can I do for this person?' into 'what should I do for this person?' It appeals to the narrative of the Gospel (and the broader biblical vision of the eschaton more generally) and orientates itself in coherence with that broader goal. As Miller-McLemore writes, '[u]ltimately, practical theology is normatively and eschatologically oriented'.<sup>38</sup> Practical theology should be co-operating with God in his plan to restore the world, to bring about redemption of society and ultimately a new creation, and a good TI should contribute towards that broader aim in some way. It will participate in the Christian narrative, what Browning calls the outer envelope consisting of 'a narrative about God's creation, governance, and redemption of the world'.<sup>39</sup> It is the teleological element especially that transforms practice into praxis.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, a good TI should be *creative*. As Campbell puts it, 'Practical theology... is more an exercise in creative imagination, the interplay of idea and action, with all the ambiguity and inconclusiveness which this implies.'<sup>41</sup> If the same Spirit of creation is at work in our reflections, then we should

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<sup>37</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> Bonnie J Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Ray Anderson, 'Practical Theology', in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, gen. ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (London; Grand Rapids: SPCK; Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 612–14 (p. 613).

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, p. 85.

expect creative and fresh connections.<sup>42</sup> The aim is to ‘see’ things anew, to experience that ‘aha!’-moment where we suddenly recognise features that were latent in the situation but not initially apparent and catch a vision of what could be, what Kelsey calls ‘imaginative construal’.<sup>43</sup> The process of theological reflection should be enriching, enhancing and motivating for all involved in the PE. These, then, are the chief characteristics of a good Theological Imperative: brief, narrow, integrated, Christian, teleological, and creative.

One way of recognising a good TI is that it has both an element of surprise and yet at the same time feels somehow ‘logical’ retrospectively. It is a surprise in that it is the fruit of new insight and creativity, resulting in a fresh response to a complex initial situation that had no obvious solution at the outset. At the far side of the process of reflection, however, it may well seem straightforward, and perhaps even inevitable, to respond in this way towards the PE, and may well be relatively easy to explain the thought process. That is, a good TI seems fitting and logical (as does much inductive thinking), but does so only retrospectively. If the TI were predictable beforehand, then the probable reasons are either that the PE was not complex, or the CD was done with a particular TI in mind, perhaps to justify doing again what has always been done before.

### **Christian Praxis**

The final phase in the Theological Imperative model of practical theology is to move back across the axis from reflective to active mode. Browning asks, ‘What should be our praxis in this concrete situation?’<sup>44</sup> The practical theologian returns to the situation encountered, but this time with a theological response. Having agreed upon the theological vision, the TI, the focus then is on the tactical task of seeking to implement the vision ‘on the ground’. A common experience of those putting the TI model into practice is that their CP was unimaginable beforehand. The TI provides the fresh vision or ideal, and what remains is a final phase of creative, pragmatic thinking in deciding how to implement it in this particular PE. Action has been transformed into Christian praxis as the practical theologian takes these theology-laden, concrete steps.

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<sup>42</sup> A creative TI is also needed to justify the efforts made in the reflective process: if in the end we simply repeat what we have always done, then it seems little has been achieved through it.

<sup>43</sup> D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); cited by Elmer Martens, ‘The Flowering and Floundering of Old Testament Theology’, *Direction*, 26 (1997), 61–79 <<http://www.directionjournal.org/26/2/flowering-and-floundering-of-old.html>> [accessed 1 March 2016]

<sup>44</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, p. 55.

A major benefit of the reflective cycle is seen in new, creative and informed responses to the PE. Another is the way that any praxis can be theologically defended because the motives are explicit. Implementing the CP inevitably results in a new situation and context for those involved in the original PE, something that can invite a fresh reflective cycle. The TI model of theological reflection (in common with most others) is best thought of less as a circle and more as a spiral of reflective acts across time.

## Conclusion

Two critical comments arise from this model. Firstly, should we be concerned by the under-determined nature of this model of practical theology? There is nothing to govern which social science disciplines are considered, and which theories are selected. The range of academic sources for any reflection are enormously influenced by personal background and current context, so the indeterminate outcome of this model of practical theology could be problematic. Ballard addresses this concern by considering the doctrine of providence:

What would God have us do in response to the specific problems of the world that we encounter? This is precisely the question asked by the doctrine of providence, and our reflection on the nature of theological reflection can only be done against that backdrop. Indeed the doctrine of providence could be said to be the practical heart of Christian believing.<sup>45</sup>

It is upon God, active in the specifics of the PE, the hurting world, the moment of meeting, that the doctrine of providence depends. Ballard asserts that providence as a doctrine must be true, if at all, in the details. The ‘hand of God’ may be seen in retrospect. Faith asserts that we are in the hands of God and must simply trust ourselves to God.<sup>46</sup> This concept of providence frames the creative, under-determined process of reflection upon the PE as part of the redemptive and ‘new creation’ mission of God. It reminds us that our actions are ultimately neither arbitrary nor spurious but rather accountable and significant, because they are done through faith and in the hope that we are, to whatever extent, co-operating with the creative Holy Spirit of God.

A second comment to be made concerns the apparent lack of reflexivity seen in this model of reflection. Graham criticises Cameron’s Theological Action Research approach (which has many points of similarity to the approach presented above) on the basis that it is not sufficiently

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<sup>45</sup> Ballard, ‘Theological Reflection’, p. 286.

<sup>46</sup> Ballard, ‘Theological Reflection’, p. 287.

reflexive.<sup>47</sup> Graham argues that action researchers should aim to bring their own perceptions and values under scrutiny:

[I]f practical theologians wish to add the tools of action research to their repertoire, they may have to address the question of whether it is appropriate to 'leave themselves off the page', or whether their own reflexivity within a given research context is necessary not only to understand the descriptive dynamics of a situation but as a form of attentiveness towards what Swinton and Mowat call "God's redemptive practices".<sup>48</sup>

As Graham says, most forms of action research tend to be concerned with one's own practice, rather than that of others. Cameron names practice generally as the subject of practical theology without it necessarily being 'one's own'. Practical theology names practice — with all its specificity and limitation — as *the* place of encounter with the infinite mystery of God, *the* place of grace; the Christian practitioner is thus compelled to seek out and speak the language of God within definite human contexts.<sup>49</sup>

The TI model of reflection concerns itself with practice as a response to personal encounter, to the pastoral situations of others at the interface between church and the world. This reflection is inevitably self-involving to the extent that those disciplines and theoretical models used in the CD phase will reflect the innate interests and abilities of the practical theologian. It is also seen in the relational nature of the PE in the first place, attending carefully to those involved, and creating space to reflect deeply. Far from being dispassionate or disinterested, the TI model is properly reflexive in that it begins and ends with self-involving relationships, both human and divine, right from the personal encounter through to the Christian praxis that is the result of prayerful reflection.

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<sup>47</sup> Elaine L. Graham, 'Is Practical Theology a Form of 'Action Research'?', *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 17 (2013), 148–78 (p. 164).

<sup>48</sup> Graham, p. 150; citing Swinton and Mowat, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Cameron and others, p. 23.

# **Beyond the Walls: A Reflection on the Theological Issues Associated with an Autistic Child's Experience at Buckfast Abbey**

Gillian Carlisle

## **Introduction**

The following theological reflection is a response to an incident experienced during a family day out at Buckfast Abbey. Our son, Zac, was nine at the time and had recently been diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The reflection is structured on the Salvation Army's Model for Faith Based Facilitation,<sup>1</sup> developed in collaboration with Judith Thompson and based on an adaptation of the Pastoral Cycle.<sup>2</sup> An evangelical perspective has informed and shaped this theological reflection, according to Busby's seven assumptions for evangelical leaders and church pastors.<sup>3</sup>

There are few disabilities as prevalent and yet as poorly understood as autism. As a report commissioned by the National Autistic Society in 2007<sup>4</sup> has demonstrated, there are continuing, widespread misconceptions about the characteristics of autism. Public perception of the condition suffers both from negative reactions to the typical behaviour commonly associated with autism, and from the legacy of unrepresentative and misleading portrayals of the condition in the media. As Simons, the report's author, pithily suggests: '...the "Rainman myth" lives on'.<sup>5</sup>

If autism has been a condition marked by lack of understanding and unchallenged assumptions, it is perhaps no more so than in the perception that the experiences of autism and spirituality are incompatible; a position founded on extrapolation of current psychological theories of autism. For instance, Swinton and Trevett note the 'complicated and potentially problematic'<sup>6</sup> relationship between religion and the experiences of those

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<sup>1</sup> Salvation Army, *Building Deeper Relationships using Faith-Based Facilitation* (London: Salvation Army, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Thompson, Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Study Guide to Theological Reflection* (London: SCM, 2008), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Daryl Busby, 'Reflections on Theological Reflection: How One Pastor Processed Ministry', *Common Ground Journal*, 6 (2008), 62-68.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Simons, *Think Differently - Act Positively: Public Perceptions of Autism* (London: National Autistic Society, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> John Swinton and Laura Trevett, 'Religion and Autism: Initiating an Interdisciplinary Approach', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 2-6 (p. 2).

with autism, and maintain that: ‘The religious/spiritual remains a “forgotten” or at least overlooked dimension of the experience of autism.’<sup>7</sup>

Against this background, there are isolated notes of dissent. These are sounded by individuals with autism, whose autobiographical accounts reflect evidence of profound comfort, peace and strength in relationship with God. Barber, for instance, makes this assertion on the basis of his own experience: ‘People with autism make connection with God.’<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Hall’s account of a childhood with ASD contains some fascinating glimpses of spiritual experience.<sup>9</sup>

## Identifying the Event or Issue

Zac has a range of impairments associated with ASD. The difficulties, which include significant sensory integration issues, dyspraxia, poor core body strength and emotional volatility, preclude mainstream education. He attends a specialist unit for children with moderate learning difficulties.

The situation for reflection took place during a visit to Buckfast Abbey in Devon, England. The abbey forms part of an active Benedictine monastery which provides a variety of facilities open to the public. At the close of our visit, our family spent some time exploring the abbey church. Within the abbey, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel provides a place for private prayer and reflection away from visitors and features a stunning stained glass depiction of Christ at the Last Supper. A floor-to-ceiling glass wall affords privacy to the chapel, whilst allowing tourists a clear and uninterrupted view of the famous window.

## Description of the Situation

Our family had spent the majority of the day at Buckfast and our children had enjoyed access to the extensive grounds and gardens. Prior to entering the abbey in the late afternoon, my husband Stephen and I knew that Zac was tired and overstimulated, and that our time in the church was likely to be limited. As we explored, I was aware that the sensory environment in the abbey would offer some particular challenges to Zac. He would struggle with the unfamiliar and distorted acoustics in the building. He also would find changes in temperature and brightness from outdoors to indoors unsettling.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Barber, ‘On Connectedness: Spirituality on the Autistic Spectrum’, *Practical Theology*, 13 (2009), 201-211 (p. 201). Barber continues: ‘Because we have particular challenges connecting with people and our environment, it is readily assumed that we cannot experience or express a sense of the spiritual.’

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Hall, *Asperger Syndrome, the Universe and Everything* (London: Jessica Kingsley Press, 2001), p. 44 and p. 92.

He had commented that the light from other windows in the abbey hurt his eyes.

We made our way to the far end of the church, where we stood together at the glass wall separating the chapel from the rest of the building. I felt a clammy hand on my arm and Zac whispered that he needed to leave. "This is a bad place," he said, and started to cry. We took the family outside and waited with Zac while the others rolled down the grass banks. It took at least ten minutes for his emotion to subside. When it did, he got to his feet. "I have to show you why it's bad there."

Zac took his Dad's hand and led us back into the abbey. His face was grey with anxiety. Back at the glass wall, he touched a finger to the wall and quietly dissolved into tears. We didn't understand. Stephen scanned the wall for some clue to the distress and indicated a small sign at eye level. "It's ok, Zac. The *No Photographs* sign is nothing to worry about. It's there so that they can sell more postcards at the gift shop."

"Not the sign, Dad. It's the wall. It won't let me in to see Jesus."

Following our visit to Buckfast, Zac found it difficult to understand and to articulate the full range of emotions experienced in the abbey. At the time his tears and his desire to leave indicated a fear that he would have a full emotional crisis. He described how he felt sad, angry, and afraid because he felt that the place was "bad". A few weeks afterwards, he explained his thoughts in this way: "It's bad to stop people from seeing Jesus. I could see Him but I couldn't get close. That's wrong. A church shouldn't be like that...*especially* a church."

I struggled to make sense of Zac's emotional outburst that day. Logic suggested that his behaviour was provoked by overstimulation, exhaustion, and a difficult sensory environment. Both my husband and I were, after all, prepared for some sort of emotional outburst before we entered the building. However, it was difficult to overlook the sense that something important had happened. I considered the nature of the connection Zac felt with the depiction of Jesus in the window: Was he drawn to Jesus in a deeper way than the rest of his family and the other visitors in the building? If this was the case, what did this say about his spirituality? Was this linked with his condition? Why did Zac protest so powerfully about the glass wall, when other visitors accepted it? I had a sense he had touched on a profound truth when he had identified the wall as "bad" and wondered if this assessment had significance beyond the physical structure of the building.

Underpinning these considerations was a sense of awe at the authenticity of Zac's faith. As parents, we have consciously and deliberately encouraged our children to build relationships with Jesus. However, the

incident had destroyed my assumptions about how those relationships should work. I had completely underestimated the significance of Zac's faith and was forced to acknowledge that my assumptions about Zac's age and diagnosis had a part to play in my expectations.

## Analysis

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to others, and how they experience the world around them.<sup>10</sup> Autism is no longer a rare disorder.<sup>11</sup> According to research conducted by the NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, the overall prevalence of autism in England is 1.1 percent of the population.<sup>12</sup>

Although the term 'autism' was first used by Kanner in 1943 to describe the unusual patterns of behaviour in a number of children referred to his clinic,<sup>13</sup> writers such as Frith suggest that documented evidence of the disorder exists from as early as the thirteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Historically, the disorder had been widely considered to be linked to poor parenting;<sup>15</sup> a position rooted in the work of Bettleheim<sup>16</sup> and Kanner<sup>17</sup> but later discredited. A wealth of research evidence led to autism's formal recognition as a medical condition in 1987,<sup>18</sup> although the behaviourally defined diagnostic criteria for the condition have evolved radically since then.<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between spirituality and ASD has been, and continues to be, an area of limited and, at times, conflicting research. This issue was highlighted in the results of a collaborative research project to survey the interface between religion and the experience of autism. Swinton

<sup>10</sup> See the National Autistic Society's website: <<http://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is.aspx>> [accessed 26 August 2016]

<sup>11</sup> See Elizabeth Hill and Uta Frith, 'Understanding Autism: Insights from Mind and Brain', *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 358 (2003), 281-289 (p. 281).

<sup>12</sup> The NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, Traolach Brugha et al., *Estimating the Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Conditions in Adults: Extending the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey* (Leeds: NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Lorna Wing, *The Autistic Spectrum - A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (London: Robinson, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Lorna Wing, 'The History of Ideas on Autism', in *Autism* 1 (1997), 13-23 (pp. 16-17).

<sup>16</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), Google ebook.

<sup>17</sup> Leo Kanner, 'Problems of Nosology and Psychodynamics of Early Infantile Autism', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 19 (1949), 416-426.

<sup>18</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd edn. (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> The recent changes to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, for instance, include the removal of Asperger's syndrome as a separate category now subsumed under a single diagnosis of 'autism spectrum disorder'.



and Trevett's editorial for the project notes the dearth of literature addressing the issues of ASD and religious experience directly, describing the area as 'under-researched' and highlighting the 'notable lack of reflection' on autism within the field of disability studies.<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to detect spiritual awareness in children with ASD, particularly those with profound communication difficulties. It is therefore necessary to turn to psychological theories of autism and autobiographical materials from those with the condition in order to gain insight into the way children with ASD may perceive the world.<sup>21</sup> Morris's work, together with that of Deeley,<sup>22</sup> and Dubin and Graetz,<sup>23</sup> highlight the theories thought to account for cognitive differences in individuals with ASD and speculate on the implications these differences may mean for spiritual experience. Recent writing by those with ASD, particularly Barber<sup>24</sup> and Memmot,<sup>25</sup> has helped to illuminate this work from a Christian perspective. There is, however, much work to be done in order to gain a better understanding of the issues at play.

Whilst there is only a limited understanding of how ASD affects spirituality theoretically, there is little doubt that the condition affects individuals practically in expression of their faith at church. Ann Memmot is a member of the autistic community in the United Kingdom, working as an advisor and advocate for those with ASD in a variety of workplace contexts. Memmot, who also acts as Church Access Consultant, highlights several issues associated with church attendance for those with ASD. Recalling the early difficulties faced in a variety of churches, she describes how she was unable to cope with the noise, socialising, and sensory overload at Sunday School, retreating into a corner in 'absolute panic'.<sup>26</sup> Memmot's description of church in her early twenties is similarly disturbing. Her experiences indicate that it was easier to meet with God alone, rather than the sensory 'battleground' that church represented. She writes: 'Finding

<sup>20</sup> Swinton and Trevett, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See Laura Morris, 'Autism and Childhood Spirituality', in *Spiritual Education: Religious, Cultural and Social Differences*, ed. by Clive Erricker, Cathy Ota and Jane Erricker (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), pp. 234-247 (p. 236).

<sup>22</sup> Quinton Deeley, 'Cognitive Style, Spirituality, and Religious Understanding: The Case of Autism', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 77-82.

<sup>23</sup> Nick Dubin and Janet E. Graetz, 'Through a Different Lens: Spirituality in the Lives of Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 29-39.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Barber, 'On Connectedness: Spirituality on the Autistic Spectrum', *Practical Theology*, 4 (2011), 201-211.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Memmot, 'A Christian Faith and Autism', 2008, <<http://annmemmott.org.uk/files/A-Christian-Faith-and-Autism.pdf>> [accessed 27 August 2016]

<sup>26</sup> Chris Barston, 'Ann Memmot', *Positive About Autism Newsletter* (2014) <[http://www.positiveaboutautism.co.uk/attachments/Ann\\_Memmott.pdf](http://www.positiveaboutautism.co.uk/attachments/Ann_Memmott.pdf)> [accessed 31 August 2016]

peace, making space for prayer, was just impossible.’<sup>27</sup> Memmot also identifies the language of religion as ‘a huge problem’<sup>28</sup> for those whose cognitive styles are governed solely by concrete experience.

Historically, there appears to be a link between ASD and spirituality. Trevett notes that many religious groups have invested ASD-related ‘irregularities’ with meaning, both positive and negative, throughout history: ‘...whether the shaman or the shamed the idea has crossed many cultures that the person displaying autistic thinking and behaviour might be a conduit for the supernatural, either good or evil’.<sup>29</sup>

There is no explicit reference to autism in Scripture. There is difficulty with the Christian tradition bringing Scripture to bear on this subject, when biblical authors had no knowledge of the condition as it is currently understood. Gillibrand affirms a belief that people with autism would have been known to the biblical writers.<sup>30</sup> Some of the symptoms described in the gospel healing narratives of demon possession are thought to be similar to those of severe autism, but this analysis is purely conjectural: the symptoms may equally correspond, for example, to epilepsy. However, as Gillibrand suggests, it is safe to assume that those displaying moderate to severe autistic tendencies would have been relegated to the margins of society in first-century Palestine.

Sadly, the church has played, and continues to play, a significant role in the marginalisation of those with disabilities. Hull argues: ‘Christian faith is a major source of the social and economic disadvantage that they suffer. Christian faith, to put it more bluntly, is not seen as part of the answer but part of the problem.’<sup>31</sup> Disability theologians agree that interpretation and understanding of the Bible have a significant role to play within this. Harshaw identifies ‘a preponderance of prejudicial perceptions of disability within the biblical canon’.<sup>32</sup> Reynolds notes ‘the uncomfortable relationship that exists between Christianity and disability’,<sup>33</sup> and argues that a problem within the faith is the ‘consistent patterns’ of characterising disability from

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Memmot rightly suggests that this problem is not ‘always the case with all people with an ASD, but certainly for some of us’. She continues: ‘Words like “love” and “spirituality” have no meaning or emotional content for me in ways that others would understand.’

<sup>29</sup> Christine Trevett, ‘Asperger's Syndrome and the Holy Fool: The Case of Brother Juniper’, *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 13 (2009), 129-150 (p. 130).

<sup>30</sup> John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church - Disabled Society: The Implications of Autism for Philosophy, Theology and Politics* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> John Hull, ‘The Broken Body in a Broken World’, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 7 (2004), 5-23 (p. 12).

<sup>32</sup> Jill Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities (Studies in Religion and Theology)* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016), p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), p. 24.

Hebrew and Christian Scriptures which are ‘invested with theological meaning and passed down through Christian traditions’.<sup>34</sup> Learning difficulties and mental illness seem to suffer from particular stigmatisation arising from hermeneutic assumptions. For instance, Gillibrand describes the ‘very long shadow’<sup>35</sup> cast by biblical association with demon possession which has led to the marginalisation and ill treatment of those concerned. Another significant issue in the Christian tradition is the tendency within theological thinking to assume models of normality and rationality. The theological assumption, in particular, that spirituality is cognitively based and demands intellectual assent to certain verbal formulations is especially problematic.

Churches have also attracted criticism from disability theologians for replicating isolating and disabling attitudes from culture. Reynolds argues, for example, that Christians commonly adopt the medical model of disability, a position tending to reduce the person to the function of their abilities.<sup>36</sup> Harshaw, who has also noted this position, describes how ‘... subtly the prevailing culture has infiltrated the consciousness of the church...’<sup>37</sup> The church has been required to address disability discrimination as a result of legislation,<sup>38</sup> but, as Gillibrand argues, the majority of improvements have focused on physical access, not the form and content of meetings.<sup>39</sup> These elements, as Harshaw argues, ‘can be equally exclusive to those whose capacities to understand and to adapt to what is taking place are limited’.<sup>40</sup> It seems that theological language presents a significant barrier to inclusion for those cognitive disabilities. This issue seems to be particularly problematic within the evangelical tradition.<sup>41</sup>

It is clear that both the environment and practices of churches require imaginative and informed reappraisal to accommodate better the challenges related to ASD, but there is more fundamental work involved in addressing attitudes, assumptions and lack of understanding regarding the condition.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 34, pp. 36-37.

<sup>35</sup> Gillibrand, 2010, p. 116.

<sup>36</sup> Reynolds, 2008, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Jill Harshaw, ‘Prophetic Voices, Silent Words: The Prophetic Role of Persons with Profound Intellectual Disabilities in Contemporary Christianity’, *Practical Theology*, 3 (2010), 311-329 (p. 319).

<sup>38</sup> In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 replaced the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, bringing the rights of people with disabilities within wider equality policies on gender, race, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation. See HM Government, Equality Act 2010: Chapter 2 <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/20>> [accessed 30 August 2016]

<sup>39</sup> Gillibrand, 2010, p. 131.

<sup>40</sup> Harshaw, 2010, p. 324.

<sup>41</sup> Gillibrand, 2010, p. 103: ‘Within the Evangelical tradition, theologies of the Word of God make absolute demands upon us as Christians. Often we do not realise that our theological terminology... automatically excludes people with disabilities and/or their carers and prevents them from finding anything there for their comfort.’

Whilst there are some excellent ASD-specific initiatives designed to promote awareness and address issues of inclusion within faith communities,<sup>42</sup> there is evidence of a lack of engagement with the nature and implications of the condition. Academic work in this area is, Harshaw argues, ‘rarely transmitted to those who live at the cutting edge of prejudicial assumptions and concomitant marginalisation, or to those whose inadequate understanding or benignly oppressive practices demonstrate that they really need to hear it’.<sup>43</sup> In the local church, these issues are exacerbated by the invisible nature of ASD. Many adults with the condition do not appear to be disabled, and those who can cope with church attendance do so unobtrusively by working hard to adapt to the environment. The condition is most likely to be visible in children’s ministry in the form of challenging behaviour. This, often misunderstood and misinterpreted, leads to further isolation and marginalisation of the children and the families affected.

In considering Zac’s experience, it is also useful to reflect on what Church tradition and scripture have to say about childhood and the spiritual experiences of the young. Whilst the Bible is ‘teeming’<sup>44</sup> with direct and indirect references to children and childhood, biblical scholars have attracted criticism in recent years for neglecting to reflect on these themes. Bunge suggests that ‘... issues related to children have tended to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology’. The neglect of building well developed and biblically informed teachings about children in theology is regarded to have negatively impacted church practice,<sup>45</sup> where a recurrent theme of marginalisation is also apparent. Nye argues: ‘in most of the literature about children in the churches, and about those who are called to minister among them, there is agreement that marginalisation is a key characteristic’.<sup>46</sup>

Academic research in the area of children’s spirituality has been driven forward in response to education legislation, rather than by impetus

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, the multi-faith work in collaboration with the Elizabeth M. Boggs Centre, *Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community* (New Jersey: UMJNJ, 2008) <[http://www.djfiddlefoundation.org/userdocs/Autism\\_&\\_Faith\\_final-1.pdf](http://www.djfiddlefoundation.org/userdocs/Autism_&_Faith_final-1.pdf)> [accessed 30 August 2016], or Ann Memmot’s work in collaboration with the Diocese of Oxford: Ann Memmot, *Welcoming Autistic People in our Churches and Communities* (Oxford: Diocese of Oxford, 2015) <[http://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/autism\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/autism_guidelines.pdf)> [accessed 29 August 2016]

<sup>43</sup> Harshaw, 2016, p. 188.

<sup>44</sup> Marcia Bunge, ‘Introduction’, in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. by Marcia Bunge (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), xvi.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 4. Bunge contends that this lack of engagement ‘helps explain why many churches struggle to create and sustain strong programs in religious education and in child-advocacy ministry’.

<sup>46</sup> Rebecca Nye, ‘Spirituality’, in *Through the Eyes of a Child: New Insights in Theology from a Child’s Perspective*, ed. by Anne Richards and Peter Privett (London: Church House Publishing, 2009a), pp. 68-84 (p. 82).

from the Church,<sup>47</sup> and there seems to be little engagement with academic developments within this field in theological colleges and in the majority of churches.<sup>48</sup> Nye proposes that many churches and faith communities still either focus solely on ‘helping children reach adult criteria of spirituality’, or ‘pay almost no attention whatsoever to the spiritual qualities and needs of children, and focus instead on other things’.<sup>49</sup>

Scripture reveals that, counter to the social and cultural patterns of the time, Jesus’ welcome and acceptance of children was not predicated by age, ability, or status.<sup>50</sup> Access to Him was, however, subject to the misguided interventions of His adult followers. The gospel of Matthew<sup>51</sup> records Jesus’ indignation when His disciples had attempted to prevent the children’s approach to Him. His response to counter and correct the disciples is framed in a dual command: ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them,’ and is followed by a powerful affirmation of blessing as He takes the children up in His arms and lays His hands on them. The significance of this action is underscored by Gundry-Volf’s commentary: ‘A more emphatic statement of children’s reception into the reign of God by Jesus could not be made.’<sup>52</sup>

Jesus’ ministry within the gospels would seem to provide evidence that He held a ‘high view of children’s spiritual life’.<sup>53</sup> White suggests that there is a ‘special chemistry’<sup>54</sup> between children and the King of Heaven. Jesus’ ministry would also clearly indicate that spiritual revelation is not restricted to the educated, the experienced, and the wise. For example, the prayer recorded in Matthew 11.20-27, offered in a context of adult cynicism, arrogance and unrepentance, would imply that God is pleased to reveal heavenly wisdom or special insight to the very young and intellectually poor.

Matthew 18.1-14 and the parallel text in Mark 9.33-37 provide challenging teaching about childlikeness as an essential quality for greatness in the kingdom of heaven. The context of this teaching, Jesus’ intervention in His disciples’ discussion about rank and ascendancy in the reign of God, is significant. Considering the thrust of the verses immediately preceding this statement, it is possible to argue that Jesus has targeted the great in

<sup>47</sup> In the UK, for instance, the surge of empirical research in children’s spirituality has been strongly linked to the school education sector’s attempts in England and Wales to respond to the 1998 Education Act.

<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Nye, *Children’s Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009b), p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Nye, 2009a, p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> See Klaus Issler, ‘Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Spirituality’, in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, ed. by Donald Ratcliff (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), pp. 54-71 (p. 63).

<sup>51</sup> See Matthew 19.13-15.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Gundry-Volf, ‘The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament’, in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 29-60 (p. 38).

<sup>53</sup> Nye, 2009b, p. 78.

<sup>54</sup> White, 2008, p. 366.

particular because ‘they stand most in danger — on account of their status in the community — of thinking of themselves at the expense of others, especially those of low status’.<sup>55</sup> Jesus’ warning about the consequences for those who put a ‘stumbling block’ before one of these ‘little ones’<sup>56</sup> is stark. Gundry-Volf makes this assertion:

...whether this text refers explicitly or implicitly to children, its relation to the preceding is clear. Just as “little ones” are special objects of divine care and protection...to despise and mistreat them is to put oneself at cross-purposes with the God of the weak.<sup>57</sup>

Zac’s age and vulnerabilities place him firmly in the realm of the ‘little ones’ to whom Jesus refers. A traditional understanding of the passage might interpret Jesus’ warning only to include temptation of little ones to sin. However, it is clear that the responsibilities of adults with power and influence have far wider scope than this perspective might suggest. Gundry-Volf articulates it in this way: ‘Matthew’s Jesus teaches childlikeness as *humility toward children* on the part of *church leaders* in particular and *for the sake of children* who are at the mercy of those greater than them in the community.’<sup>58</sup>

In Mark 9, Jesus’ teaching emphasises the significance of receiving ‘one such little child in my name’. Here, the use of *dechomai*, to ‘receive’ or ‘welcome’, is used especially with reference to hospitality, or to serving guests. When Jesus takes the child in His arms, he demonstrates this service and how greatness in the reign of God is shown by love and service of children. However, the ultimate significance of welcoming the child is revealed in Mark 9.37: ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’ Serving and welcoming children is a way of welcoming Jesus, and the one who sent Him, and, conversely, failing to welcome children implies rejection of Jesus and of God. Gundry-Volf, who explores the significance of the child’s role in this passage in representing Jesus, suggests: ‘...the child is to be taken into the arms and welcomed, for the child is weak and needy. The child thus represents Jesus as a humble, suffering figure.’ She continues: ‘To welcome a child in Jesus’ name, I therefore propose, is to welcome Jesus himself ...’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 18.6 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>57</sup> Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 42.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

## Reflect and Evaluate

As I have reflected over time on our experiences at Buckfast Abbey, what seems unique about Zac's spirituality was his ability to see differently. He had identified the wall for what it represented when it had been missed, ignored or accepted by everyone else. What happened was an instinctive, emotional and typically autistic reaction to profoundly conflicting images: It was wrong to put a wall in front of a picture of Jesus who was obviously beckoning people, because it represented something that stopped people from getting to Him. There was something, too, that communicated cruelty in constructing the wall with glass, because people could see the promise of Jesus' beauty and His unconditional welcome, but were forced to stay at a distance. Zac's grasp of the purposes of church was sufficient to make a childlike but perceptive analysis of the abbey as a 'bad place'.

As the analysis section of this reflection suggests, children and those with disabilities have been relegated to the margins of religious thought, life, and ministry for millennia. In this context, Zac's assessment of his experience at Buckfast is poignant and powerful. When Zac says: 'a church shouldn't be like that ... especially a church', he reveals a kingdom-orientated sensibility that challenges religious tradition at a prophetic level. Zac's knowledge of Jesus and His people has led him to expect and to demand something better, something different to this experience. In Zac's mind, the church, if it is to *be* the church, needs to have open access. Its key purpose is to facilitate access to Jesus, not to prevent it. As I remember Zac's lone voice of protest in the vastness of the abbey, I am reminded of the following statement by Jean Vanier in a recent interview: 'The danger is to say that the church has all the knowledge it needs already and is not looking for any more prophets. But the prophets — they are the disabled people.'<sup>60</sup>

Joseph Shapiro writes: 'there is no pity or tragedy in disability... it is society's myths, fears and stereotypes that make being disabled difficult'.<sup>61</sup> Shapiro's comment suggests that it is external social and cultural forces, rather than the functionality of a condition or disability, that are most challenging. Perhaps this assessment holds especially true for the experiences of those with ASD and other such disabilities in the expression of their spirituality in churches and faith communities. Memmot's work, and similar initiatives, show that children with ASD, and their families, share a similar perspective to Zac. They are aware of some sense of welcome and acceptance in church but, in practice, full inclusion involves engagement with an exhausting array of hurdles. These hurdles might be represented by a challenging worship environment or inhospitable theology, inaccessible

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<sup>60</sup> Roy McCloughry, *The Enabled Life: Christianity in a Disabling World* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 118.

<sup>61</sup> See Reynolds, 2008, p. 115.

teaching or disabling assumptions. There is a strong sense that, like the crowd at Buckfast Abbey, the majority of other churchgoers are unaware of these hurdles. They are missed, ignored or unthinkingly accepted. I am reminded of Swinton's observation that, in looking at our religious tradition through the eyes of people with disabilities, we begin to see things differently.<sup>62</sup> In the same way that Zac's perspective brought new insight on the purposes of, and values inherent in, the physical architecture of one church, it is clear that the experiences of children with similar difficulties can ask similar questions of the architecture of Church tradition.

Literature on children's spirituality provides significant evidence of the damage admitted when the questions raised by children's experiences are silenced or are excluded from dialogue with Christian theology.<sup>63</sup> Isanon, who documents the struggles of one young man with ASD in this area, records the following indictment of Adam's church experience and its impact on his conception of God:

... his religious education had led him to see the God of Christianity as culturally a God of words, a God of walls, a God of abstractions, a God constructed and restricted by the static rationality of dogmatic conservatism, a God imprisoned by institutional and cultural bias...<sup>64</sup>

Isanon proceeds to describe how Adam 'could not conceive of a God on these terms', and poignantly recounts how 'words and walls' had become symbols of his struggle against religiosity, religious institutions, religious dogma, and religious abstraction.

Tragically, church can be a 'bad place' for children like Zac and Adam. Perhaps the more hospitable are those, like Buckfast Abbey, where Jesus can be seen, but children like Zac cannot get close. Perhaps the less hospitable are like those experienced by Adam, where Jesus cannot be perceived at all. Regardless, the responsibilities and the consequences for those who lead, manage and attend church are profound. Jesus' warning to those who create stumbling blocks, those who build glass walls, and those who simply get in the way must ring out in our consciousness: 'Woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes.'<sup>65</sup>

For Adam, Zac, and the others who have been considered in this reflection, it seems clear that a diagnosis of ASD is not the ultimate obstacle to relationship with God. Instead, it may be that it is ASD's interaction or lack of interaction with the structures of religion, and with those representing

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<sup>62</sup> John Swinton, *Is Theological Reflection a Technique or a Virtue? Listening to Hidden Voices* (BIAPT, 2010) <<http://www.biapt.org.uk/tr5.shtml>> [accessed 22 September 2016]

<sup>63</sup> See Nye, 2009a, p. 75.

<sup>64</sup> Abe Isanon, *Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum: Of Falling Sparrows* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), p. 79.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew 18.7 (NRSV).



these structures, that is spiritually disabling. This position can be scripturally supported from Matthew 18. It is not aspects of age or ability that predicate access to and relationship with God. Jesus seems to suggest that the real limitations, glass walls or ‘stumbling blocks’ to this interaction are represented by the attitudes and interventions of others in positions of power and influence.

As I reflect on the spirituality displayed by Zac at Buckfast Abbey, what I observe is not a relationship with God that is enhanced or enabled somehow by a different cognitive or biochemical make up, but rather a spirituality that *seems unique* because it challenges and transcends the human and disabling boundaries that I, my faith community, and the Church at large have placed on it.

I have hesitated to ask Zac if he felt that Jesus was in some way present in the window at Buckfast. One thing seems clear, however, as I reflect on the vivid memory of my weeping child before a stained glass window. The Jesus that I know and love is more represented, more present, and more alive in a child railing at the frustrations of worshipping in an inhospitable place than in the impassive face in the grandeur of the glass. If this is the case, a more difficult question is posed by this proposition. Could it be that the inhospitable architecture of our churches is not just excluding people, but the presence of God?

There is clear theological room for this consideration. Harshaw’s analysis of Matthew 25 would suggest that God is ‘in some way mysteriously present to, in and with’<sup>66</sup> those with intellectual disabilities. Gundry-Volf’s appraisal of Mark 9.37 would also suggest that this could be the case. It is children like Zac whom we must welcome if we are to make space for the presence of God. Welcoming children has ultimate significance: ‘It is a way of receiving and serving Jesus and thus also the God who sent him. Conversely, failing to welcome children implies rejection of Jesus and God.’<sup>67</sup>

For children with ASD and others with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, the barriers to inclusion in church are largely unseen, but impenetrable. They encounter glass walls that exclude on the basis of behaviour that is perceived to be disruptive or disturbing, on account of others’ ignorance, prejudice and fear, and in the face of cold and implacable theology. It is not enough to be interested and aware, or even to be sympathetic. If the Church persists on leaving our ‘little ones’ behind these

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<sup>66</sup> Harshaw, 2010, p. 326.

<sup>67</sup> Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 44.

walls, we risk also excluding the One whom we worship.<sup>68</sup> Without children like Zac in our midst, we render our buildings little more than draughty museums of religion and tradition, and our meetings dry memorials to what could, and should, have been.

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<sup>68</sup> Harshaw, 2010, p. 326, asks: 'If Christ is not present in His Church, His Body, in what sense can it be the Church at all?'

# Conflicting Views of Freedom and the Impact on Mission in a Post-Communist Context

Wojciech Kowalewski

## Introduction

There are different kinds of freedom and numerous interpretations of its implications for human culture.<sup>1</sup> However, the concept of freedom is very often associated with creating an open space for diversity and the development of a pluralist society. Thus discussions about the meaning of freedom in its various expressions are very much part of the contemporary ethos in post-communist society.<sup>2</sup> Recognising the complexity of the subject of freedom, it is important to note that it will be discussed only partially here, as the main concern is to focus on some aspects of the contemporary freedom discourse that are relevant to this article. Firstly, I will very briefly define two different concepts of freedom which seem to shape current discussions in a post-communist context. Secondly, I will analyse various approaches to culture that come as a result of understanding freedom. The paper will conclude with some implications for mission in this area.

## Two Concepts of Freedom

Generally speaking, there are two concepts of freedom which dominate the contemporary discussions, both at individual and social levels, in post-communist Poland. The first concept of freedom places great emphasis on an individual's right of freedom of thought, expression, emotion, and the right of full autonomy in every sphere of life, which effectively promotes a highly individualised vision of freedom. Such freedom is seen as the right and basis of social life in its various expressions. In its most liberal interpretations, such an understanding of freedom assumes 'epistemological'

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<sup>1</sup> There are many possible approaches to the study of freedom (e.g. ontological, epistemological, anthropological, axiological, ethical, pedagogical or theological), and various levels of application of this concept to social life (e.g. freedom of thought and of word, economic freedom, freedom of conscience and of religion). For more on various interpretations of freedom see, for example, J. Andrew Kirk, *The Meaning of Freedom. A Study of Secular, Muslim and Christian Views* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998) and in a Polish context Józef Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności* [Unfortunate Gift of Freedom] (Kraków: Znak, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *Współczesne społeczeństwo polskie* [Contemporary Polish Society], ed. by Anna Giza and Małgorzata Sikora (Warszawa: PWN, 2012).

and ‘axiological’ relativism.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary society, however, this concept of freedom is often based on a consumer-driven mentality, which promises universality of happiness, whereby everybody is free to choose and, by doing so, to find fulfilment in this life. Here ‘choice’ is in many ways reduced to the concept of consumer freedom, whereby one is free to choose, but often underestimating or simply neglecting the fact that in order to become a consumer, one has to be able to purchase consumer goods. At this level, similarly within any western society, an ideal of consumerist freedom is seen in the greater accumulation of wealth and expansion of choice in terms of available leisure. This process, however, is not limited to material goods and services. If there is no principled constraint on what can be consumed, then the impact of the consuming experience is very deep, whereby various social relations and activities can in principle be exchanged as commodities and serve to elevate or limit one’s social status.<sup>4</sup> In this way, freedom is almost equated with individual choice and private life, which is in principle unconstrained and for the sake of private pleasure. It is clear, then, that the consumer orientation is not only limited to the economic sphere, but it actually reflects the relation of the individual to the entire culture. In this respect, any universal claims of truth or normative axioms are generally regarded as threatening the individual’s freedom and pragmatic attitudes toward life.<sup>5</sup>

But ‘choice’ also implies a value-oriented activity which consequently identifies one’s attitude toward life and culture, and it is the traditional value-oriented approach that is in sharp contrast with the consumerist freedom.<sup>6</sup> This approach puts great emphasis on the pursuit of the traditional values of truth, goodness, and responsibility towards others and is often referred to as ‘responsible freedom’. This freedom stands in direct conflict with relativism, and demands inner discipline, responsibility, and activity, which not only values an individual but also takes into account the good of others (community). This view is usually associated with Roman Catholic moralists and theologians, most notably Pope John Paul II, who often argued against an individualised, consumerist view of freedom and pointed to the fundamental relationship between human freedom with truth and goodness

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<sup>3</sup> Stanisław Kowalczyk, *Wolność naturą i prawem człowieka. Indywidualny i społeczny wymiar wolności* [Freedom – Human’s Nature and Right. Individual and Social Dimension of Freedom] (Sandomierz: Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2000), p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this see *Życie w konsumpcji, konsumpcja w życiu* [Life of Consumption, Consumption in Life], ed. by Anna Zawadzka, Małgorzata Górnik-Durose (Sopot: GWP, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> For a systematic analysis of different theories of truth see Zbigniew Tworak, *Współczesne teorie prawdy* [Contemporary Theories of Truth] (Poznań: UAM, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Irena Borowik, *Odbudowywanie pamięci. Przemiany religijne w Środkowo-Wschodniej Europie po upadku komunizmu* [The Rebuilding of Memory. Religious Change in Central and Eastern Europe after the Fall of Communism] (Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, 2000), p. 223.

as the only foundations of 'authentic freedom'. He warned that if the God-given virtues of truth and goodness are to be separated from freedom, it will deeply affect human culture and eventually destroy its foundation. In this way of thinking, it is often argued that freedom isolated from the values of truth and goodness becomes dangerous for an individual, whose freedom ought to be used in a responsible manner.<sup>7</sup>

These are the two views of freedom that in different forms and on different levels are heard in various discussions. It is important to note that there are different variations of these views and not all are necessarily mutually exclusive. Whilst it is necessary to recognise the dangers and challenges associated with various interpretations of the ethos based on freedom, one cannot simply assume that this process automatically leads to moral compromise and unfaithfulness to God, as some traditionalists would like to argue. The rhetoric often used in this context is that of a 'culture war', whereby anything that does not reflect traditional value culture is labelled as 'culture of death', or called 'liberal', whether it has anything to do with liberal thought or not.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, not all pointing to the importance of valuing an individual in modern society disregard the notion of responsibility towards others. Nevertheless, these are some of the issues that characterise contemporary freedom discourse in Poland.

There are some deep consequences that raise concrete pastoral concerns in this freedom ethos. The first concern has to do with changes in the moral-ethical sphere of life in relation to freedom. If one takes freedom to mean arbitrariness, complete independence, no limits, living in accordance with an individual's preferences, as many young people state as their ideal of freedom (even if in reality there always are some limits set by the society), then privatisation of morality is the natural consequence.<sup>9</sup> Even if not all take such a radical, individualistic view of freedom as a norm, it is apparent that more and more people in Polish society embrace an individualistic approach to freedom. This has a deep impact on various aspects of life. Many lively discussions on individualised freedom point to some changes taking place in Polish social consciousness and widening ethical choices. This expansion of choices touches on issues such as sexual liberalisation and the disintegration of the value of family. While in Poland

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Evangelium Vitae* where the pope reflects on the value of life. For more on the pope's teaching on freedom see Jarosław Gowin, *Kościół w czasach wolności 1989-1999* [The Church in Times of Freedom 1989-1999] (Kraków: Znak, 1999), pp. 391-445.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this dialogue see Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> For sociological data about young people's attitudes and values in contemporary society see: Hanna Świda-Ziembka, *Młodzi w nowym świecie* [Young in the New World] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005).

family is still perceived as one of the highest values, the quality of relationships is becoming weaker and the divorce rates increase. Therefore, Andrzej Seweryn, an experienced minister and the former President of the Polish Baptist Union, points to the importance of the Christian family by emphasising that this is 'the most difficult test of Christian living' in contemporary society. He notes that 'Family is the first and most important church! If there is no God there, how will our children find him?'<sup>10</sup> This comment expresses deep pastoral concern, in the light of the morality change taking place in Poland, whereby family bonds are weakened and market-driven mentality is strengthened.

This points to another pastoral concern resulting from the new social and economic freedom, namely, raising the value of material possessions with all its consequences. The so-called 'western dream' in many ways has constructed the new ideological and ethical foundations of life, which point to the high expectations of many people in the post-communist world and conceptualise the better future in terms of ever-increasing levels of economic growth, technological progress and personal consumption. One of the outside commentators discussing this phenomenon in Eastern and Central Europe notes: 'Tragically, the unquestioned commitment to modernisation and the unrestrained quest of the Western Dream seem as pronounced among those who identify with the church as those outside it.'<sup>11</sup> Poland is no different in this respect and therefore a new set of ethical issues associated with individual freedoms has appeared on the pastoral agenda. *Być bogatym – ale jak?* [To be rich – but how?] is the title of an article opening an issue of the Baptist monthly *Slowo Prawdy*, which explores issues of 'being' and 'having' from a biblical perspective. After reflecting on the various qualities of 'godliness' and Christian understanding of richness and poverty, it concludes with words of challenge: 'Let us not live by desires to have more or envying others who already have more... Let us rather learn to be grateful for all we have; it is better than the bitterness of unfulfilled expectations.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Adam Cenian observes in *Bogactwo i ubóstwo – nasze wyzwania* [Richness and Poverty – Our Challenges] how a 'consumerist mentality' pervades the whole culture and how, from a biblical perspective, there is a special responsibility placed on those blessed with riches as well as on the church that should stimulate solidarity, care for one another and especially for those who are in need. Other related themes often raised in this context are the effects of advertising on people's lives, Christian attitudes to money,

<sup>10</sup> Andrzej Seweryn, 'Kościół otwartych drzwi' [Church With Open Doors], *Slowo Prawdy*, No. 4 (2000), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Sine, *Wild Hope. A Wake-up Call to the Challenges and Opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1992), p. 207.

<sup>12</sup> Włodek Tasak, 'Być bogatym – ale jak?' [To Be Rich – But How?], *Slowo Prawdy*, No. 5 (2000), p. 4.

and the relationships between faith and success and ‘ethics of richness’ in general.<sup>13</sup>

## Freedom and Culture

However, what it is important to emphasise from an analytical point of view is that one’s reactions to freedom depend very much on one’s approach to culture. Therefore, the critical question from a Christian perspective, often heard among pastors, is how far one can integrate with culture on the basis of freedom; or, in other words, when do cultural changes become threatening to Christian identity?<sup>14</sup> The answers to these questions depend on one’s understanding of the role of culture, the level of openness to the culture and one’s self-perception within the culture. On the basis of his research among Polish Baptist pastors, Mirosław Patalon concluded that they approach cultural change in three different ways: (1) Closing oneself within one’s own subculture, which practically implies further alienation from the reality outside the church; (2) Risky search for new forms of being and godliness, which is also associated with greater openness to culture; (3) Indifference, maintenance and survival-oriented activity, with lack of interest in cultural change.<sup>15</sup> These three typological approaches to culture have an obvious influence on one’s perception of freedom. Reflecting on this phenomenon from the perspective of an integrative approach, it becomes necessary to evaluate these in the light of suggested missional renewal.

In the first approach to culture, the ‘world’ is seen in rather negative terms as sinful, and therefore any cultural changes in the churches are to be avoided, unless geared toward traditional values. Understood in this way, this approach is especially attractive to those who are theologically and culturally fundamentalist-minded. Freedom, when seen from this perspective, is clearly defined, value-oriented but also consolidating for those who consider themselves as members of the church in opposition to the world. Interestingly, Christian fundamentalism attracts groups of people who are tired of the ethical state of affairs or those seeking radical change and is seen by some as the hope for the future of Christianity in Poland. Widely respected Catholic priest and philosopher Józef Tischner, who represented the ‘open’ or so-called liberal wing of Catholicism, however, warns against falling into the trap of what he refers to throughout his book

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<sup>13</sup> Adam Cenian, ‘Bagactwo i ubóstwo - nasze wyzwania’ [Richness and Poverty - Our Challenges], *Slowo Prawdy*, No. 5 (2000), pp. 5ff.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Baptist monthly magazine *Slowo Prawdy* 4 (2000) under a theme *Zmiany kulturowe czy zeswiecczenie?* [Cultural Changes or Secularisation?].

<sup>15</sup> Mirosław Patalon, ‘Głoszenie Ewangelii we współczesnym świecie’ [Proclamation of the gospel in the contemporary world], *Rocznik Teologiczny, ChAT*, Vol. XLII (2000), 175-99.

as 'phenomenology of fear against freedom'.<sup>16</sup> Over-emphasis on separation from the world can result in the loss of relevance of Christian faith for the world. Therefore Tischner places freedom and faith close together when he says that 'what is important for faith is not so much what necessities of this world it serves, but rather what kind of freedom it expresses'.<sup>17</sup> Grace of faith is grace of liberation. To enter the world of faith one needs to go through the gate of freedom. Tischner also argues that in the new context of the 'crisis of freedom' what is urgently needed is 'a renewed consciousness of grace' as grace overcomes evil. He then asserts that 'one cannot understand grace without touching on the problem of freedom'.<sup>18</sup> What is very significant in Tischner's stimulating theology of freedom is his confidence in the Good News and his critique of an unhealthy fear of the world, moralist exaltation above others, and escape from freedom.<sup>19</sup> These are some important and theologically valid criticisms of separating oneself from culture.

The second approach to culture, characterised by more openness, does not perceive the world as a danger, but rather as a sort of challenge, especially in the light of Jesus' commissioning of his disciples to go and make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28.19). It is associated with openness not only towards the people of other churches but also openness to broadly understand the culture in which Christians live. It is also associated with seeking new methods of communication and co-operation with culture.<sup>20</sup> This leads to a model of Christian community that Andrzej Seweryn refers to as 'the open doors church'. He suggests that churches facing the results of rapid cultural transformation surrounding them and wishing to remain communicative require some change. However, he also warns that such a change should never be at the cost of compromise of one's 'spiritual uniqueness'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while generally sympathetic towards the cause of Christian cultural relevance, Seweryn also clearly points to some dangers that secularisation can bring and to criteria for an appropriate assessment of applying cultural change to the church. So the questions to be asked are: How does the change affect individual and communal spirituality? How does it look in the light of biblical values? How divisive or uniting is it

<sup>16</sup> Józef Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności* [Unfortunate Gift of Freedom] (Kraków: Znak, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Józef Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni* [In the Land of Imagination] (Kraków: Znak, 1997), p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> Józef Tischner, 'Christianity in the Post-Communist Vacuum', *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 20, Nos. 3-4 (1992), 331-38 (p.338).

<sup>19</sup> Jarosław Gowin, *Religia i ludzkie biedy. Księdza Tischnera spory o kościół* [Religion and People's Poverty. Tischner's Arguments about the Church] (Kraków: Znak, 2003), pp. 199ff.

<sup>20</sup> Mirosław Patalon, 'Postmodern Trends in Communicating Christianity', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2001), 20-32.

<sup>21</sup> Andrzej Seweryn, 'Kościół otwartych drzwi' [Church With Open Doors], *Słowo Prawdy*, No. 4 (2000), 9-10 (p.9).



in terms of the way it affects the local congregation?<sup>22</sup> However, what is clear is that one's view of freedom in relation to others is much broader than in the first approach. This approach is also very significant in another aspect, namely that it releases and encourages creativity. The distinctive quality of Christian freedom is based on openness to a life of self-giving love and creativity. In this way truly free individuals are not free in a sense of being a law unto themselves, but rather they are free in that they have 'the power to create and complete themselves in the course of making their unique and intelligent response to the call of what is good'.<sup>23</sup> Such an understanding of freedom as being closely associated with community and creativity is very significant and can in many ways be helpful in dealing with the post-communist crisis of freedom. For so many years, any forms of freedom and creativity were oppressed 'from above' and thus forged a mentality of 'survival' and 'maintenance' instead of creative engagement with reality. Unfortunately, sometimes the same rationalities apply to church life, when some focus their energies on the maintenance of their status quo, while others seek creative engagement with continuity and change in contemporary culture. Given this background and the new emphases, theologically crucial relations of freedom, community and creativity, rooted in self-giving love, provide a constructive Christian framework for engagement with today's changing culture. More and more people realise that creativity, imagination and appropriate forms of criticism are necessary in engaging the post-communist vacuum. If practical theology is 'the critical and creative understanding of Christian experience, personal and social, in Church and the world' then it needs to be continually renewed and committed to seeking the manifestations of Jesus Christ who is constantly calling the estranged creation into the fullness and wholeness of life.<sup>24</sup> Such an understanding, however, is mediated through cultural forms and structures within which Christian faith expresses itself in many ways, from ritual and art to analytical conceptualisation, and thus faith 'is never found *simpliciter* but always in and through the layers of meaning and expression through which we all live our lives'.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, such freedom liberates people to realise their own unique potential through creativity, which at the same time points to the 'social side of freedom'.<sup>26</sup> Freedom, then, in some important ways is shaped by relationships in community and thus responsible freedom is always motivated by love, or solidarity with others, a counter-movement to any

<sup>22</sup> Andrzej Seweryn, 'Kościół...', p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Nigel Biggar, *Good Life: Reflections on What We Value Today* (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Ballard and Pam Couture, eds., *Globalisation and Difference: Practical Theology in a World Context* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1999), Preface.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface.

<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 118.

forms of injustice and domination. Given over four decades of the communist domination system which in many ways affected the whole of society, especially when it came to trust and any claims of truth, and the new crisis of freedom with all that it entails, there is a deep longing and need in contemporary society for creative freedom, solidarity and open community, as described by Moltmann. Of course this is the ideal. Such a community creates space in which the personal gifts of each member are recognised and used to edify others. The reality is, however, that people continue to struggle with sin and therefore affect the community with their egocentric visions and in this way break the ideal. Nevertheless, Christian community is called to continuing conversion and change, which implies transformation in every aspect of life.

The third approach to culture in relation to freedom expresses least potential for creative engagement with culture. While the first approach to culture focused all its energy on deliberate separation from the world and the second on seeking ways to engage the world, the third approach represents a maintenance mindset. It is characterised by indifference toward cultural change and survival-oriented activity. In other words, churches with this perspective do things as they always did and do not consider the need for any change. Patalon, commenting on the future of the church in Poland, notes that authoritarian attitudes, based on rational explanations, over-emphasis of dogmatic statements and wide institutionalisation of faith, are not really relevant to the rising challenges of today's society, which demands more subjectivity and openness when it comes to faith issues.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this diversity in terms of relating to culture, there is one thing that all Christians at least in principle agree on; namely, the source of freedom identified with Jesus Christ. Therefore there are at least two aspects of Christian freedom that can provide us with some meaningful alternative to the current secularised streams of thought in society. Firstly, the concept of freedom in Christ is clearly identified as a redemptive process, breaking the bondage of sin in an individual's life and, secondly, the implications of this process need to be explored over against the wider community context.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the missional challenge today is to clearly identify the uniqueness of freedom in Christ on both individual and communal levels and point to the contribution it can make to the quality of life on both levels.

With this framework in mind, it is important to identify the uniqueness of Christian freedom, which puts great emphasis on the need for inner redemption from sin. When seen in a wider perspective, this process is not

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<sup>27</sup> Mirosław Patalon, 'Kontrowersje wokół przyszłości Kościoła' [Controversies about the future of the Church], *Myśl Protestantka*, No. 4 (1999), 12-24.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Galatians 2.20; 5.1; 1 Corinthians 9.19-23.

only about a negative sense of freedom (in terms of freedom from) but rather in a positive sense (freedom to) which initiates a person on the way to truth, goodness, and love and at the same time points to the fundamental basis of human identity.<sup>29</sup> In this way, true freedom does not consist of power to direct life, but rather it is deeply rooted in life with God, new life lived as it was originally intended by God.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, paradoxically, the free person does not belong to himself, but rather his identity centres around the One who set him free. This subjection, however, is not based on authoritarian rule, but on the basis of a close alliance. In this way, Christian understanding of freedom reflects the deepest aspects of human existence such as a sense of identity, personhood and community, which from a theological perspective are ontologically rooted in God's Trinitarian being.<sup>31</sup> This effects a realisation of freedom which is expressed in freely loving, believing, and trusting, in giving ourselves away and thereby finding our true selves. Therefore, in the light of these considerations, the person who is truly free shows that freedom in being free for the service of God and his fellow human beings, not being motivated by a self-consciousness directed towards dominance. This concept clearly disassociates itself from extreme individualistic views of freedom. Thus, what is significant in this concept of freedom is the close link with the responsibility that it brings. Gunton cites Luther's famous statement: 'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.' Beneath the surface of Luther's paradoxical formulation lies 'a theology of human life under God'.<sup>32</sup> It points to the liberation that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings, but in relation with communitarian responsibility. Clearly for Luther there is no freedom without the acceptance of God's salvific action and redemption from the power of sin by grace. Therefore, the gospel is a gospel because it is 'a setting free, from the slavery that is indeed slavery to the slavery which is the freedom of the Christian'.<sup>33</sup> It is in this way that the person who is truly free is a *doulos Christou*, a slave of Christ, who, the more penetrated by the love of God, the more free they become for such service.<sup>34</sup> Against some criticisms that such a view of freedom is rooted in dualism and can only lead to 'social unfreedom', Eberhard Jungel clarified the case, arguing that when Luther speaks of freedom as a qualification of the inner rather than the outer person, he does not imply that it has no impact on our

<sup>29</sup> For more on this see Józef Tischner, 'Christianity in the Post-Communist Vacuum', *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 20, Nos. 3-4 (1992), 331-38.

<sup>30</sup> See Romans 6.22; Galatians 5.1, 13; 1 Peter 2.16.

<sup>31</sup> See Stanley J. Grenz, *Created For Community*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 118.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.

<sup>34</sup> See 1 Corinthians 7.22; Romans 1.1; Philippians 1.1; for various forms of service in the New Testament see Galatians 5.22; 1 Corinthians 9.19ff.

social reality. He rather emphasises that human freedom has to be seen as an act of liberation that starts from within and then the redemptive work of God enables individuals to reflect that freedom in the outer acts which are the service of others in the community, and not the other way around.<sup>35</sup> It is in this way that this concept of freedom integrates both an individual and community, inner change and social transformation, responsibility and service of others. It is also in such a way that the biblical concept of the centrality of *agape* as integral to the understanding of Christian responsibility in terms of 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5.6b) should govern all social relationships as well as the internal life of the community of believers.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, far from being just an abstract construct, a community that finds the source of its identity in *agape* is not merely limited to a certain attitude towards others, but rather involves 'a purposive act of will' and 'concrete acts of service'.<sup>37</sup> One of the greatest pastoral challenges today is helping people see the practical implications of such freedom and the way it can become transformative in its various expressions, such as family life, business ethics, and all other social relations.

## Creating a Space for Freedom

In summary, from the perspective of mission, creating a space for freedom is a very significant aspect of mission today. This points to the recognition of at least four aspects of change if the renewal is to take place: evaluation of attitudes to culture; appreciation of individuality; rediscovering the value of creativity; and a renewed community (responsibility towards others). These aspects form a concrete missional agenda to work on in the years to come. The Church can only mobilise the energies at its disposal if it takes note of various expressions of freedom among people who identify themselves as belonging to the Christian community, seeking to make a difference in the world around them.

The effectiveness of mission depends a lot on the church's use of freedom and its potentialities for today's society. The appreciation of and openness to the differences of opinion or individuality is deeply significant and, when applied to mission, can indeed contribute to bridging the gap between the church and society. What it is important to note is that appreciation of 'individuality' does not entail 'individualism'.<sup>38</sup> In theological perspective, while the former focuses on the individual as 'a

<sup>35</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Promise...*, pp. 119ff.

<sup>36</sup> For more on this see Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1980), pp. 57ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Norman C. Kraus, *The Community of the Spirit*, Revised edn. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1993), p. 43.

responsible person in community' and is affirmed in the form and content of covenant, the latter puts great emphasis on 'the independence of individuals and their private rights', which is often grounded in alienation and pride.<sup>39</sup> In a similar way Moltmann recognises a clear difference between 'an individual' and 'a person', saying that the former 'has no relationships, no attributes, no memories and no names', while the latter is 'a human existence living in the resonant field of his social connections and his history'.<sup>40</sup> Thus a person is the social being and as such needs to be in community. Gunton, commenting on the concept of the person, also notes that, '[t]o treat the person and the individual as the same thing – to define the person as an individual – is to lose both person and individual'.<sup>41</sup>

In this way individualism is often the driving force of contemporary society, whereby the individual's freedom and rights often do not take into consideration the needs of others. Instead narcissism, hedonism, pleasure seeking, and happiness form the major goals and motivations of many people today. Effectively individualism promotes such values as 'personal freedom, self-improvement, privacy, achievement, independence, detachment, and self-interest'.<sup>42</sup> The danger of such preoccupation with self-centredness, self-reliance, and self-fulfillment is that it leaves no room for others, nor any room for God. But it is precisely in such a context that the recovery of the value of creativity in engaging with the whole of life provides significant impetus to the re-imagination of mission.

A practical example of what it might look like when the call to create a 'space of freedom' is taken seriously on a practical level is SLOT Art Festival in Poland.<sup>43</sup> SLOT is a Christian movement uniting people involved in creating and developing contemporary youth culture, who are eager to experience and pass on the reality of tolerant and open attitudes towards others, based on love and appreciation of freedom. The SLOT Festival is a gathering of young artists from different areas of art (such as music, theatre, dance, painting, film, photography) and social workers, who have the opportunity to present their achievements, and participants, who have the chance not only to have fun, but also to discover and develop their talents and to build their own system of values in a friendly, inspiring atmosphere. The SLOT Art Festival is one of the largest alternative culture festivals in Poland. It consists of five days filled with workshops, concerts, parties, films, and seminars. The organisers state:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2000), p. 333.

<sup>41</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Promise...*, p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Created For Community*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 314.

<sup>43</sup> To read more on this, see <<http://slot.art.pl/en>> [accessed 22 September 2016]

We're intrigued by fresh, new, seeking ideas in culture which are often missing in popular media forms. We value independent, authentic artists who create because of an inner need to express themselves and not because of the dictates of specialists who want more profit and sales. For many that means realizing one's ideas based on the philosophy of DIY (Do It Yourself). We look for artists/performers who treat the public and their message seriously, and who are not so self-absorbed in themselves or their art. We also look for a public who is not interested in a one-sided view of things or in just consuming, but who are interactive, willing to dialog, cooperate, and experience something together with others.<sup>44</sup>

SLOT is not just an event for a few days, but a movement. The organisers describe it in these terms:

SLOT is more of a movement than an organization. Local creative centers are located all around Poland where groups of people co-operate with SLOT. Usually these people are connected to SLOT and realise their ideas on a local level with SLOT days, film discussion groups, concerts and parties. The name SLOT stands for "Society of Local Creative Centers" in Polish and it reflects our vision of creativity based on relationships and common values within an autonomous network of collectives, initiatives and organizations actively involved in their world.<sup>45</sup>

SLOT challenges the 'withdraw from culture' attitude in the church and creates opportunity for engagement with contemporary culture. In this way, SLOT is not just a festival but a movement and it affects various groups of people. SLOT DAYS in local communities involve entire youth groups in the movement and seek to have a deep impact on the young people of the churches. It seeks to speak to the youth generation in the language of their culture and frees them to explore the implications of the Christian faith for their lives. This is a very brave and successful attempt to seek creative expression of faith with contemporary culture – the very issue with which the church is struggling – and SLOT has shown the way to this new freedom.

One potential risk in such an approach is losing Christian identity for the sake of culture, if not carefully appropriated. Such appropriation, however, is the very core issue with which both the church and SLOT seem to struggle. Nevertheless, the growing impact of this movement is breaking with some of the traditional taboos of the churches and provides a helpful model for creative use of freedom. From a missional perspective, as many churches in general are losing young people in Poland, creating a space for freedom becomes one of the central tasks. SLOT is a good example of practical application and understanding of freedom which is closely associated with community and creativity. This kind of approach to engaging contemporary culture provides opportunity for a broader impact. It is

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

important to see that responsible freedom integrates both an individual and community, inner change, and creative engagement with the world. This provides an important missional agenda for the Church in contemporary society.

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## Book Reviews

Rupen Das, *Compassion and the Mission of God: Revealing the Invisible Kingdom* (Leicester: Langham Global Library, 2016), ISBN 978-1-78368-114-3

It is refreshing to read a book on mission which has emerged from the author's personal journey to discover and understand the character of God. Rupen Das brings together his practical experience in the area of relief and development, his theological scholarship, and his passion for the victims of global human injustices, in order to explore and develop a 'theology of compassion'.

This book is a thorough study of the Old and New Testament narratives, the practice of the early church, and the teaching of the early church fathers related to the issues of poverty, injustice and compassion. Related study on the cultural and socio-economic background broadens the perspective of the topic and lays the author's argument on a solid basis. A wide variety of theological insights makes it a valuable textbook for theology and mission students. References to relevant Bible texts provide support for those who wish to use this resource for church Bible studies or preaching. In this respect, an index of names, topics and/or Scripture texts would have been a useful addition.

Over many years a stumbling block to the development of a healthy evangelical mission theology has been the deep divide between evangelism and social action. Das does not avoid this theological controversy, but rather becomes an insightful conversation partner, offering a fresh approach to holistic mission springing from the 'theology of compassion'. Thus he makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion about the balance between evangelism and social action in Christian ministries. It is not only an excellent theoretical study but also challenges us to reflect on our own convictions about Christian responsibility for the poor and marginalised.

A further stumbling block has been the emergence of professional aid and development agencies to respond to the needs of the poor and marginalised, leaving the church with the task of evangelism. Das acknowledges that it is the churches themselves that need to act as the agents of change, bringing together verbal proclamation and acts of compassion. However, I would have expected a more thorough analysis of the complex dynamics between the churches and aid agencies, identifying the major challenges and offering a way forward. This may require another book.

In summary, Das offers a detailed and theologically sound image of a compassionate God, whose commitment to the poor and marginalised



challenges his church to reflect his character. If the readers allow this book to shape their understanding of Christian mission, then the Kingdom of God will grow in the world.

**Reviewed by Helle Liht**

Assistant General Secretary, European Baptist Federation

Roman Mach, *The Elusive Structure Macrostructure of the Apocalypse of John: The Complex Literary Arrangement of an Open Text*, Series Friedensauer Schriftenreihe, Reihe A Theologie, Band 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, Imprint of Peter Lang GmbH, 2015), ISBN 978-3-631-66984-6

We approach reading a new book with some pre-understanding of the subject with which it deals. Our intuition, guided by our previous reading, often happens to be right, not least because our selection of reading reflects our liking. I cannot imagine a thoughtful Christian who has not been drawn in excitement into the visionary world of Revelation and who has not experienced frustration in trying to translate its message to the reader's own setting. How is it that a single biblical text can produce such an unsettling multiplicity of readings? Is this due to the reader's inability to grasp the meaning of the text or does it follow organically from the nature of the text?

In a search for his own answer to these questions, Czech biblical scholar Dr Roman Mach – currently with the Theological Seminary of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Sazava, Czech Republic – presents skilfully an interwoven tapestry of insights and enquiries into the macro-structure of the Apocalypse of John. The book has the encyclopaedic quality of a compendium to research on Revelation. Building upon years of research and the findings of dozens of respected Johannine scholars, he creates a medium and vocabulary that enable him to relate findings of Umberto Eco's literary theory of 'open' text to the study of the Apocalypse. If it were not for the clear focus of his work on the macro-structure of the book, the breadth of the themes and authors addressed might have produced a patchy treatment of the subject. Mach is able to maintain the coherence of his work unchallenged and to argue persuasively that 'openness' or multiplicity of reading is an essential feature of the last book of Christian scriptural canon, as it is for any other text of poetic creativity. The structure and methodological grounding of his argument enables this book to make a creative contribution to the study of the Book of Revelation.

**Reviewed by The Revd Doc Dr Parush R Parushev**

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MINISTRIES  
OF COMPASSION  
among  
Russian Evangelicals  
1905–1929



Mary Raber

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We congratulate our former PhD student Mary Raber on the recent publication of the results of her PhD research.